

The Ghost Of Hank Williams

When the legendary jazz drummer Buddy Rich was being wheeled into the operating room for open heart surgery, the doctor asked him if he was allergic to anything; he said yes, country and western music.

And so goes as well the king of country music, Hank Williams. Sixty years after his death he retains a base of millions of fans, he is in the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame as an early influence, and is acknowledged by the music press as a vital part of the early construction of rock and roll. Yet he off the radar screen of most music lovers. His contributions to country and rock are not known by the general public or even by the average country music fan. Where goest thou young rogue?

The best place to start may be at the end. Hank Williams death was as sorrowful as any of his hurtin' songs. On January 1st, 1953 he died a quiet death in the back seat of his Cadillac from a combination of too much booze and pills. He was twenty nine, on the last of many comebacks and an embarrassment to the country music establishment. He had been banned from the Grand Old Opry on several occasions, on his death it seemed he would be banned from the memory of country music.

Country music then (and now) was very protective of its appearance. By the fifties the country establishment (mostly Roy Acuff and Fred Rose) were feeling the effects of their image of "barefoot country cuzins". In the multicultural fifties, country music was like brown shoes at a black tie affair. Although millions of fans revered Hank Williams and the kind of music he sang, Nashville set upon changing its image from "corn pone music sung in dirty dungarees" to "The Cosmopolitan Movement". Modern country would trade jeans for suits and ties, replace fiddles with violins, and ditch the "Tobacco Road" look for a citified image. But you can't be country and city at the same time. Hard country fans and artists fought back for the real thing. The result was a compromise. The Jim Reeves and the Merle Haggards of the world would co-exist. And Minnie Pearl would keep the price tag on her hat

As the years passed, Hank Williams retained a strong base of fans. But the eastern, liberal, establishment of newspapers, television, and academia refused to recognize Hank Williams or country music as an art form. It was almost completely white, viewed as right wing (didn't the KKK listen to country music while lynching the blacks?) and the New York intelligentsia saw the fans as toothless, barefoot, and unwashed.

Dorothy Kilgallen whose "Voice of Broadway" column in The New York Evening Journal could be described as the most eastern and liberal voice of the New York literati from the thirties until her early death in 1965 wrote from the perch of a highbrow for the "urban jet set". Outside of the City were truck stops, farmers, and hot sheet motels filled with dirty people, mostly named Jethro.

When country music performers from Nashville's Grand Ole Opry appeared in concert at Carnegie Hall to benefit New York's Musicians Aid Society in 1961, Kilgallen dismissed them as "hicks from the sticks." In her column she advised that "everyone should leave town" (but where would they go?). "The hillbillies are coming!" Patsy Cline, one of the headliners, responded that "Miss Dorothy called us Nashville performers' the gang from Grand Ole Opry – "hicks from the sticks. And if I have the pleasure of seeing that wicked witch, I'll let her know how proud I am to be a hick from the sticks."

All through these years of being ignored or loathed by the Dorothy Kilgallen's and her ilk, Hank Williams, long dead, continued to sell millions of records. His son, Hank Williams Jr. continued the legend by singing his father's old songs to his old fans. To many he was the reincarnation of "Luke The Drifter" Hank Senior's alter ego (he would later make his own name in country music).

Through the sixties and seventies the only way a country artist could make it big mainstream was either with a novelty tune (A Boy Named Sue) or by castrating the country from their music and rolling out homogenized country to the middle of the road or easy listening markets. Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers made millions by abandoning their roots.

And still today Hank Williams, ghost he may be to many, retains his popularity among the grass roots.

But he still doesn't get the respect he deserves from the opinion makers of TV, print and the musical academic community.

And he probably never will.